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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies and describes development of rural sociological research in the southern United States. It traces the emergence of rural sociology as a discipline from recognition of problems of rural life in the early 1900's, points out that the northern United States predominated in early research, and discusses why early rural sociological research/teaching did not occur in land grant agricultural colleges. The paper attributes the rapid growth of southern rural sociology to the 1925 Purnell Act which made research funds available to sociologists from state agricultural colleges such as North Carolina State College, the early leader in southern rural sociology. The paper characterizes four development eras for rural sociological research: Depression Years Era which documented much of what is known about rural poverty, farm tenancy, and rural/urban population characteristics; the War Years Era, which turned attention to studies of rural community organization and to manpower and labor research; the Great Society Era, which focused on rural and community development and social change; and the New Rural Sociology Era, which projects a serious, involved concern with rural problem issues of today. The paper concludes that rural sociology in the South, while following national trends, retains a regional focus. (LFL)

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By

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Paper presented at the Southern Rural Sociological Association Meeting
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Brief Review of Early History of Rural Sociology:

I will set the stage for my discussion of the history of rural sociological research in the South with a brief review of the emergence of Rural Sociology as a an independent specialty. Recognition of Rural Sociology as a viable discipline dates back to the turn of the century. The discipline owes its emergence to the problems of rural life which reached a point in the early 1900's which demanded national attention. It was natural that efforts be made to understand and control the forces responsible for the plight of farmers and for the exodus of ruralites to towns and cities. The researchers who undertook this task were, after awhile, identified as rural sociologists. Lowry Nelson provides a lucid account of the birth and rise of Rural Sociology in his book entitled Rural Sociology: Its Origins and Growth in the United States.¹

In the context of this paper, it is of interest to note that the early history of Rural Sociology is pretty well limited to the Northern region of the nation. The

¹Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press, 1969.

first course in Rural Sociology was taught at the University of Chicago in 1894. The first course in an agricultural college was offered at Rhode Island Agricultural College in 1904. The first text in Rural Sociology, entitled Constructive Rural Sociology, was published by John M. Gillette of North Dakota in 1913. The second text to appear was written by Paul L. Vogt of Ohio State University in 1917. It was called Introduction To Rural Sociology. The first department of rural sociology was also established at Cornell University in 1918, with Dwight Sanderson as head.

It is also of interest to note, as an introduction to the main thrust of my topic, that the roots of Rural Sociology teaching and research are not in the state agricultural colleges, as one knowledgeable of the current picture might surmise. In fact, it appears the colleges of agriculture were quite apprehensive of the designation "sociology" in the early part of the century, even with the legitimizing "rural" as an adjective. Rural Sociology began in universities and colleges not designated as Land Grant colleges of agriculture. Some of the institutions to pioneer in Rural Sociology teaching and research were the University of Chicago, Univ. of Michigan, Univ. of Minnesota, Colombia Univ., and Cornell Univ..

Rural sociology research began to take definitive shape in the early 1900's. Research in the discipline was

well underway by the end of what Brunner calls the "The Pre-Purnell Period", i. e. before 1925 when the Purnell Act made research funds for which sociologists could apply available to state colleges of agriculture.² Perhaps the most influential research report during this period was the classic study by Charles G. Galpin entitled "The Social Anatomy of an Agricultural Community". However, a bibliography of social surveys published in 1927 cited 72 general rural community surveys, 54 rural education studies, 38 rural church studies, 23 rural child labor and welfare reports, and 6 cost of living investigations completed by rural sociologists.

The South participated in the rural sociological research effort of the pre-Purnell Act period to a considerable extent. This participation was mostly in the form of socio-economic studies made on a county basis. Five of these studies were made by researchers at the State Normal School located in Athens, Georgia; 25 by researchers in the respective departments of rural social science at the universities of North and South Carolina; 20 by people at the University of Virginia, and several studies at the universities in Texas and Tennessee. These first rural sociological studies in the South were prompted by the condition of serious poverty which existed in the decade of

²Edmund de S. Brunner, The Growth of a Science: A Half-Century of Rural Sociological Research in the United States, (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1957), Chap. 1.

the 1910s. With the passage of the Furnell Act, Rural Sociology research began a rapid growth in the South. The leader in this growth was North Carolina State College--under the leadership of Carl Taylor. Taylor came to North Carolina State in 1920 and was able to establish a great tradition in the dozen or so years he was there. Fortunately, for him, Eugene C. Branson--a pioneer rural sociologist--had already set the stage as head of the Dept. of Rural Economics at the University of North Carolina. Branson brought Howard Odum to North Carolina, who in turn hired Rupert Vance and others who did many studies of rural people. Carle Zimmerman joined Taylor at North Carolina State and the two of them collaborated on a study of the living conditions of 1000 North Carolina rural families. This study received great publicity. After Taylor left North Carolina, Horace Hamilton and others carried on the tradition which had been established.

Although North Carolina was the acknowledged early leader in Rural Sociology research in the South, several other states were prominent in this respect. In Virginia, both the university and Va. Poly. Institute were noticably involved in studies of rural people. At the University of Virginia, Wilson Gee headed a department known as the Rural Social Economics Department and maintained close ties with Charles Galpin who was now with the U.S.D.A. He and his colleagues published several well-received research

reports. William S. Garnett came to V. P. I. to be the first chairman of Rural Sociology in 1925, after serving in like capacity at Texas A. & M. He collaborated with Horace Hamilton and others in publishing a number of research study reports.

Louisiana became known in rural sociological circles in the early 1930's through the works of T. Lynn Smith and Fred C. Frey and their students. A. W. Hayes, at Tulane University from 1920 to 1925, had set the stage for rural sociological research in the State with several community studies. O. D. Duncan pioneered in Rural Sociology at Oklahoma State University during this same time as did B. O. Williams at the University of Georgia. A bit later Howard Beers came to Kentucky and Harold Kaufman arrived in Mississippi. Since the 1940's, every state in the South has had rural sociologists who have made contributions to research. I have known all of them and wish I had time to enumerate their names. Currently (1986), all 13 Southern states are represented in the Directory of North American Institutions sponsoring Rural Sociology research.

Development Eras of Rural Sociology Research in the South and Nation

The research attention of rural sociologists in the U. S. have changed over the years. This change is clearly an indication of the professions sensitivity and response to major national issues and concerns at various periods of

time. In this Section, we identify the broad developmental eras of Rural Sociology and review the response of rural sociologists to the times in terms of research activity. The research of Southern Rural Sociologists was never a mirror reflection of the research of rural sociologists in other regions but trends and broad ranges of research topics were similar. The eras which are identified were delineated by Bill Falk and myself.

The Depression Years Era:

The Depression Era, insofar as American agriculture and rural life was concerned, had its beginning shortly after World War I. It continued until the beginning of World War II. This era, in many ways, represents the time when rural sociology research came into its own. The seriousness of the economic situation led President Roosevelt to sign into law the bill which created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) in May of 1933. This law opened wide the door of opportunity for rural sociologists, giving them research and policy roles they had never been given before.

One of the important divisions of the newly created FERA was the Division of Research and Statistics. Dwight Sanderson of Cornell University, a renowned rural sociologist, was invited to head this Division. The division immediately undertook a census of unemployment which revealed, among other facts, that one and one-half

million farm families were receiving relief. Sanderson immediately began to recruit rural sociologists to serve as state supervisors of rural research under the FERA. These supervisors recruited research workers from the rolls of the Civil Works Administration (the early New Deal work-relief program) and began a series of regional and nationwide studies which had a profound impact on national policy as well as on Rural Sociology as a discipline. It is of note that many of the rural sociologists recruited by Sanderson were from colleges and universities, and a goodly number were from the South.

The first nation-wide project put into operation by Sanderson's rural research unit was a study of rural families on relief. Altogether, 20 research monographs were completed and published between 1935 and 1940. Some of these studies were literally monumental in their contribution to the understanding of rural problems. Among these were Six Rural Problem Areas: Relief-Resources-Rehabilitation by P. G. Beck and M. C. Forster (published as FERA Monograph No. 1). This study dramatically exposed the entire cotton South as a region with severe economic problems.

Other studies which received wide attention were: A. R. Mangus's Rural Regions of the United States, C. C. Zimmerman and Nathan L. Whetten's Rural Families on Relief, T. J. Woofter's Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton

Plantation, C. E. Lively and Conrad Taeuber's Rural Migration in the United States, F. D. Cronin and Howard Beer's Social Problems of the Drought Area, and C. F. Loomis's Social Relationships and Institutions in Seven New Rural Communities. Anyone acquainted with the above titles will know that much of the research was done in the Southern Region. And, the publicity which the studies received gave Rural Sociology there a boost.

After 1936, the WPA did not sponsor nationwide or regional field surveys, although research activity was carried on at the state level with WPA support. Carl Taylor had become Chief of the Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare in 1937, and immediately brought in bright young rural sociologists to do research for the Division. Many of the studies done had a southern setting. For example, E. A. Schuler's Social Status and Farm Tenure-Attitudes and Social Conditions of Corn Belt and Cotton Belt Farmers and Carl C. Taylor, Helen W. Wheeler and E. L. Kirkpatrick's Disadvantaged Classes in American Classes in American Agriculture. Probably the most famous of the studies sponsored by the Division during the Depression Era were the six "Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community" projects. One of these studies was done in Harmony, Georgia.

The research conducted by rural sociologists during the Depression Era exploded the myth that farming somehow

protected people from poverty and other social problems. It also verified the existence of extreme diversity from one rural area to another in the U. S. Not only were cultural differences exposed, differences in levels and standards of living were documented, the difference in rural and urban demographic patterns and characteristics were determined, and differences in patterns of rural and urban migration were described. Southern rural sociologists had a heavy hand in this research. They documented much of what we now know about rural poverty, rural relief, farm tenancy, farm labor, rural social stratification, rural-urban population characteristic, and rural-urban migration patterns.

The War Years Era:

The second clearly recognizable era of Rural Sociology research began when the U. S. became involved in World War II, in 1941. This era, as we define it, lasted past the end of the War through the post-war period until the latter 1940's. During the span of this decade we again see how social forces gave direction to Rural Sociological research.

Olen Leonard, then an employee of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the USDA, provides us with insight regarding the impact of the War years on the work of rural sociologists:

The Pearl Harbor Tragedy, and its concomitant

developments, have profoundly and perhaps permanently affected rural sociological research. Demands brought to bear upon personnel in rural sociology have probably been unique in the discipline's history.²

Leonard goes on to note that special organizational and functional assignments had been given to certain federal agencies by Congressional action or executive order. To illustrate the impact of these assignments on rural sociology, he points out how the Federal Extension Service was given the responsibility for initiating a project which involved the organization of the entire rural population of the Nation. The plan required the selection and training of some 1,000,000 local leaders. Carl Taylor, in his position as Head of the Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare was to make available members of his community organization staff "for any assistance they could give State Extension personnel". Rural sociologists in Land-Grant colleges and universities, in the South as elsewhere, were likewise quickly recruited to do the needed research and training for what came to be called the "Neighborhood Leadership Organization Program". Many federal war agencies became interested in the community organization research and activity being carried on by rural sociologists and solicited their help either directly or

²Olen Leonard, "Some Efforts of Rural Sociology in the Present War", Rural Sociology, (June, 1944) Vol. 9, No. 2, p. 143.

indirectly.

The sensitivity of Rural Sociology to the "times" is indicated by the appointment of a subcommittee on wartime research of the Committee on Research of the RSS in early 1943. In the discharge of their duties, the members of the subcommittee found that the War had indeed caused a shift in the type of rural sociological research being conducted in agricultural experiment stations. The main change they saw was an increased emphasis on social organization, farm labor and farm tenure studies. The number of population studies remained at the pre-war level, but studies of rural welfare, levels and standards of living and social adjustment dropped in number.⁴ Bill Sewell affirms that the greatest change the war and post-war years brought in rural sociological research was a shift in emphasis from rural social welfare problems and policy studies to a broader range of concerns. He notes labor and manpower studies were prominent during the war years but faded quickly thereafter.⁵

All in all, the impact of the War Era on Rural Sociology research in the Southern region and the rest of the nation is easy to detect. Attention immediately began to focus on strategies for organizing rural communities for

⁴A. R. Mangus, "Some Reflections on Wartime Research", Rural Sociology, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Dec., 1943), pp. 409-412.

⁵William H. Sewell, "Rural Sociological Research, 1936-1965", Rural Sociology, Vol. 30, No. 4 (December, 1965), p. 435.

action and on manpower and labor studies. Paul Jehlik points out that a number of studies were of short duration and designed primarily for defense and administrative purposes.*

"The Great Society" Era:

Our interpretation of the evolving times suggests that the War Era in rural sociological research development was followed by what we have called the The Great Society Era, borrowing from President Lyndon B. Johnson. This era roughly spans the decades of the 50's and 60's. It is marked by rather serious national attempts to improve agricultural programs and deal with economic and demographic changes in rural areas. The era was formalized by the passage of what came to be known as the Rural Development Program in 1954 (under President Eisenhower).

For over 30 years, Purnell funds were the principal support for rural sociological research. The share of these funds received by rural sociologists was limited, although they were highly dependent upon them for their research. The passage of the Hatch Act, as amended, in 1955 improved the situation for rural sociologists considerably. The Hatch Act incorporated all the provisions of the Purnell Act (and some other acts) which supported social science

*Paul J. Jehlik, "Rural Sociology and Sociological Reality: An Appraisal", Rural Sociology, Vol. 29, No. 4 (December, 1964), p. 357.

research. By 1957 the number of rural sociology research projects supported by Federal-grant funds had grown to 131--a considerable jump from the 65 projects supported in 1937. In 1964, a total of 324 projects, wholly or partially rural sociological in identity, were on the active federally supported rolls.

The above numbers show that rural sociological research activity gained impetus during the Great Society era. This impetus was registered in the South as elsewhere. It was a direct result of an emphasis on rural development at the national congressional and administrative levels. This attention was inspired by the discovery that the number of rural dwellers and the number of farms were declining at rather rapid rates and that numerous technological innovations were impacting on rural areas. The Great Society era can be characterized as the time when rural sociologists seriously discovered social change. At the forefront of this discovery were the famous innovation and diffusion studies which became a hallmark of the discipline. No other discipline, to our knowledge, has published as many articles dealing with the theoretical, descriptive and analytical aspects of the acceptance and diffusion of innovations as has Rural Sociology.⁷ Scores of studies were done in attempts to understand and promote

⁷For an account of the earlier studies on acceptance of innovation and diffusion see: Alvin L. Bertrand, et. al., Rural Sociology, (New York, Mc-Graw-Hill, 1958), Chapters 24-26.

community development. While the efforts devoted to research in community organization and leadership were most numerous, studies of community action and of the impact of rural industrialization also became popular. In fact, the maturing of the profession is seen in the broad range of studies designed to provide information on the economic, social and psychological problems of rural areas. Examples are: youth studies, studies of the aged, adjustment studies of in- and out- migrants, unmet health-care needs studies, family studies, and education studies. It should be noted that population studies remained popular during the Great Society Era, with emphasis on rural-urban comparisons of trends in composition, distribution, fertility, mortality, and migration. Southerners were in the middle of this research effort, as the voluminous literature produced during the era testifies.

The "New" Rural Sociology Era:

The New Rural Sociology Era, in our estimation began in the early 1970s. Its chief hallmark is a noticeably serious attempt to make Rural Sociology research meaningful to intelligent decision making for the current problems of rural America, with emphasis on farmers and farming. The Winter, 1985 issue of the Journal of Rural Sociology provides evidence of a general disciplinary recognition of this new Research era. However, there is no better indicator of this "new" era than the last

publication in the The Rural Studies Series of the Rural Sociological Society. This volume, edited by Don Dillman and Daryl Hobbs, includes 41 chapters dedicated to rural social problems in the U.S. It is addressed to scholars, policy makers and citizens and offers suggestions for research on the important issues identified. These suggestions reflect the direction of Rural Sociology research today, in the South as well as nationally. A review of current projects listed by rural sociologists shows a continuing strong emphasis on people, on the community, on agriculture, and on natural resources and the environment. The "new" direction that the research is taking is indicated by projects with designations such as energy, appropriate technology, minorities, community services, crime, social impact assessment, the structure of agriculture, land use, fisheries, water, and natural resource use in thier titles.

Conclusion:

It is clear that the direction of rural sociological research in the South has changed through the years. This change has followed national patterns while maintaining a regional character, more or less inspired by the unique problems of the region. Today the research of southern rural sociologists, along with that of their fellow professionals in the rest of the U. S., is clearly tuned to the complex rural problems which face our society.